Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

July 16, 2015

To: Governor's Office, Tim Baker, State Capitol, Room 204, P.O. Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
Environmental Quality Council, State Capitol, Room 106, P.O. Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620-1704
Dept. of Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901
Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:
Director's Office Parks Division Lands Section FWP Commissioners
Fisheries Division Legal Unit Wildlife Division Design & Construction
MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202
MT State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103
MT State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., P.O. Box 201800, Helena, MT 59620
James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, P.O. Box 1184, Helena, MT 59624
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624
George Ochenski, P.O. Box 689, Helena, MT 59624
Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771
Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624
Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923
Jack Jones, 3014 Irene St., Butte, MT 59701
Jack Atcheson, 2309 Hancock Avenue, Butte MT 59701
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 420 Barrett Street, Dillon, MT 59725
Big Hole Watershed Committee, P.O. Box 931, Butte, MT 59703
Montana Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 7186, Missoula, MT 59807
Dan Vermillion, FWP Commissioner, Livingston MT
Earnest and Colleen Bacon, 2215 Fishtrap Creek Road, Wisdom, MT 59761
Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation, 730 N. Montana Street, Dillon, MT 59725-9424
George Grant Chapter of Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 563, Butte, MT 59703
Skyline Sportsmen, P.O. Box 173, Butte, MT 59703
Anaconda Sportsmen, 2 Cherry, Anaconda, MT 59711
E.T. Bud Moran, Chairman CSKT, PO Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855
Al Lubeck, 2710 Amherst, Ave, Butte, MT 59701
Adam Rissien, ORV Coordinator, Wildands CPR, PO Box 7516, Missoula, MT 59807
Josiah Pinkham, Tribal Arch., Nez Perce Tribe, PO Box 365, Lapwai, ID 83540

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared for a proposal to restore native fish species including westslope cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling to Long Branch Creek and Schultz Creek in the Big Hole River drainage in southwest Montana. Non-native rainbow trout and Yellowstone cutthroat trout are present in Long Branch Creek upstream of natural waterfall fish barrier near the confluence with Rock Creek (near

Glen). Non-native Yellowstone cutthroat trout are present in Schultz Creek upstream of a natural waterfall near the confluence with Bender Creek (near Wisdom). These non-native fish would be removed using rotenone and westslope cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling would be restocked into Long Branch Creek and westslope cutthroat trout only would be restocked into Schultz Creek. Rotenone applied to the streams would be neutralized at the fish barriers using potassium permanganate preventing fish from being killed downstream of the proposed project areas.

A total of 1 written comment was received.

It is my decision to proceed with the proposed action to restore WCT to Long Branch Creek and Schultz Creek in the Big Hole drainage.

Questions regarding these Decision Notices should be mailed to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Long Branch/Schultz Creek Native Fish Restoration
Attn: Jim Olsen
1820 Meadowlark Ln.
Butte, MT 59701

Or e-mailed to: jimolsen@mt.gov

Sincerely,

Sam B. Sheppard
Region Three Supervisor

Environmental Assessment for Native Fish Restoration in 2 Small Streams in the Big Hole River Drainage

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DECISION NOTICE

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
July 16, 2015

Proposed Action

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is proposing to restore native westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) in Long Branch Creek and Schultz Creek. Both streams have natural barriers precluding upstream fish movement. Long Branch Lake is located on Long Branch Creek and is a shallow (3 ft deep) lake that would be included in the WCT restoration project. Genetic evidence suggests both streams harbored native populations of WCT, but non-native rainbow and Yellowstone cutthroat trout have been introduced to the streams and have hybridized with the WCT. Hybridized trout present in the streams upstream of the fish barriers are proposed for removal using the piscicide rotenone in the formulation of CFT Legumine (5% rotenone). WCT from non-hybridized populations would be used to repopulate these once the hybridized trout are removed. Arctic grayling, which are not native to Long Branch Creek but are native to the Big Hole River drainage and a species in need of conservation, would also be introduced to Long Branch Creek once non-native fish are removed.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on June 5th, 2015.

Public comments on the proposed project were taken for 30 days (through July 5th, 2015). The EA notice was mailed to 31 individuals and groups; legal notice was printed in the Montana Standard (Butte) newspaper and the Dillon Tribune. A draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov//publicnotices/. One written comment was received after the comment period had ended. This comment was included in the review and listed below.

Comment 1. *I support the restoration of WCT to the 2 creeks because they are apparently native to those tributaries. According to the EA, the grayling are not native, and there are other tributaries where they exist with non-native species. I think it would be more productive to remove the non-native species from those tributaries rather than introduce grayling to streams where they are not native. I hope you will consider this option...*

Response: FWP is pursuing projects restore tributaries to the Big Hole where grayling were historically present (i.e., French Creek, Wise River, Rock Creek, Trail Creek, Governor Creek) but have been extirpated over the last 100 years. However, the opportunities to restore Arctic grayling and also remove non-native trout are rare. Most of the historically occupied tributaries to the Big Hole are low gradient streams that are well connected (fish have very easy passage to and from the streams) with the Big Hole River. Therefore there is no way to remove non-native fish without them quickly recolonizing the stream without constructing a fish barrier. A fish barrier would then preclude grayling from the Big Hole from migrating into and out of the stream which is a well documented habit the fish for both spawning and for thermal refuge during warm dry summers like this one and would negatively impact grayling. Therefore, the option of removing non-native fish to conserve grayling in tributaries to the Big Hole is not a management tool that would likely be widely used. Therefore, Long Branch Creek is a relatively unique opportunity to expand the range of grayling into suitable habitat exists upstream of a natural fish barrier that precluded at lease grayling passage

It is uncertain if grayling introduction to Long Branch Creek will be successful. Such a project has not been attempted before. We are certain that westslope cutthroat trout will thrive, but less certain about grayling and therefore this project is something of an experiment. If successful, this project would expand the current range of grayling into formerly unoccupied habitat that is within the historic range of the fish. It would create a new population and expand the range of the fish and thus be a step toward conserving the fish and lessening the chance of it warranting listing as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and the public comments received, and benefits and risks associated with this project, it is my decision to go forward with the Proposed Action as outlined in the Draft Environmental Assessment. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

_____

Sam B. Sheppard
Region Three Supervisor